

# REMEMBERING THE WAR DISPENSARY, THE FORERUNNER OF NAVAL MEDICAL CENTER SAN DIEGO

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*Editor's note: 2017 marks the centennial of Navy Medicine in San Diego. The following blog commemorates this historical milestone.*

One-hundred years ago, the U.S. Navy moved to the vacated grounds of the Panama-California Exposition in Balboa Park to establish a training camp for Sailors destined for the “Great War.”(1) Amidst the stately exposition buildings and expanse of canvas recruit tents, stood the former Expo Park Police Headquarters, soon to be home to the camp’s medical facility. Few could have imagined back then this modest structure would represent the very foundation of the Navy’s flagship hospital in San Diego, Calif., and the springboard for medical care that continues to this day.



*Navy Bluejackets at the San Diego-Panama Exposition Grounds. Held from January 1, 1915 to January 1, 1917, the Exposition was organized to tout San Diego as a port of call for ships travelling north after passing through the Panama Canal. Expo grounds were later used by the Navy for a training camp. Author's Collection. (Photo via BUMED Historian)*

When it opened in the spring of 1917, the Navy Training Camp’s medical facility –sometimes referred to as the “war dispensary,”(2) — consisted of an administrative office and two 25-bed wards. A separate surgical ward was located Pepper Grove, Balboa Park.

In June, Cmdr. Ammen Farenholt, later rear admiral, a veteran of the Battle of Manila Bay (1898), took the helm as the dispensary’s first senior medical officer. (3)

Those first few months of 1917, the war dispensary offered limited medical services to the recruit population—recruit physicals, daily sick call as well as administering required prophylaxis and

vaccinations. In July, following the diagnosis of 16 cases of cerebro-meningitis, dispensary personnel began regular bacteriological examinations of recruits.

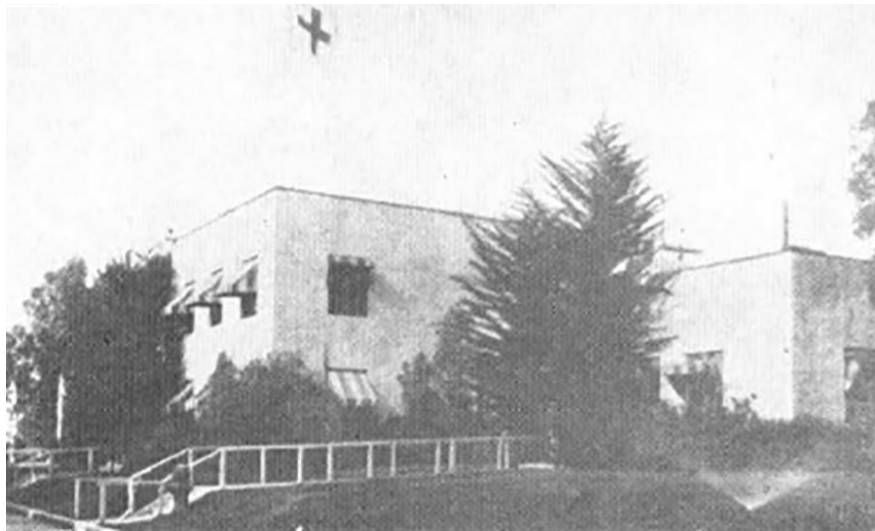


*Navy Recruits at the Naval Training Camp Balboa Park, San Diego, in 1918. Author's Collection. (Photo via BUMED Historian)*

Through the summer of 1917, the Navy maintained contracts with local civilian and public health service facilities for hospitalization in San Diego. It was not until September 4, 1917 that the dispensary was deemed "fully organized, staffed and equipped" to conduct laboratory work and care for medical/surgical cases as well as contagious diseases. In memorandums to the surgeon general and the commandant of the training camp, Dr. Farenholt pronounced that on this date the dispensary could provide "hospital services" to military personnel in the San Diego area and recommended severing contracts with civilian institutions.(4)

Over the course of its brief history, the war dispensary evolved to meet the medical needs of the growing military population in San Diego. Its surgical ward expanded by 14 beds. French windows were installed in the wards enabling access to fresh air and sunlight. An ear, nose and throat operating room and a 30-bed isolation ward for influenza patients was also established. By the end of World War I (November 11, 1918), the dispensary comprised more than 800 hospital beds.

From May 1917 to December 1918, the dispensary treated 9,997 patients, most suffering from infectious diseases. Of the total patient population, 891 were invalided from service; and 63 died. During the same period, dispensary medical personnel conducted 11,690 laboratory examinations; administered 8,789 typhoid prophylaxes; and gave 8,943 cowpox vaccinations. (5)



*War Dispensary, ca. 1917. The Dispensary served as the Naval Training Camp's Medical Facility. In 1919, the facility was re-designated as Naval Hospital San Diego. BUMED Archives. (Photo via BUMED Historian)*

In 1919, two years after the Navy first took over the Exposition Grounds at Balboa Park, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels officially re-designated the War Dispensary the "Naval Hospital San Diego." Roads and driveways around the facility were paved and a nurses' quarters was placed in commission in July of that year.

In July 1919, an Act of Congress authorized the Navy to accept a tract of land (at Inspiration Point) at Balboa Park at no cost for the construction of a new naval hospital. This hospital was completed and placed in commission on August 22, 1922 marking the next chapter in the proud history of Navy Medicine in San Diego.(6)

***Endnotes:***

1. *Panama-California Exposition was held in Balboa Park, San Diego from January 1, 1915 to January 1, 1917 organized to tout San Diego as a port of call for ships traveling north after passing westward through the Panama Canal. The name for the park comes from the province in Panama that is located on the Pacific entrance to the Panama Canal.*
2. *Navy medical personnel operated a temporary field hospital at the Panama-California Exposition. Navy Medicine first arrived in San Diego with the 4th Marine Regiment on July 10, 1914 after returning from deployment to Mexican waters during the period following the U.S. engagement in Veracruz (April 1914). Originally based on North Island, the 4th Marines relocated their encampment to the Panama-California Exposition grounds in Balboa Park on December 15, 1915. During the period of the Exposition (January 1, 1915- January 1, 1917), Navy medical personnel attached to the 4th Marines operated a temporary "field hospital." Before the establishment of the War Dispensary in 1917, the Navy relied on civilian hospitals in San Diego. Infectious cases were treated in a municipal isolation hospital and noninfectious cases were treated in civil hospitals under the care of the U.S. Public Health Officer in that port.*
3. *Dr. Farenholt was native of Norfolk, Va., and son of Civil War U.S. Navy veteran Adm. Oscar Farenholt. He was a graduate of Harvard Medical School (1893). Throughout his 42-year of service, Farenholt would serve as Commanding Officer of Naval Hospital Bremerton (1910-1911), Naval Hospital Mare Island (1918-1921; 1928-1931), and Naval Hospital Great Lakes (1924-1928).*
4. *Senior Medical Officer to Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, September 4, 1917. Letter 129251. BUMED Correspondence Collection. BUMED Record Group (RG 52). National Archives, Washington, D.C.*
5. *Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy for the Fiscal Year 1917. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1917; Annual Report of the Surgeon General, U.S. Navy to the Secretary of the Navy for the Fiscal Year 1919. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919.*
6. *Patton, Ken. "Naval Hospital San Diego." Historical Survey of Navy Hospitals, 1970 (Unpublished) BUMED Archives.*